

# ***Decision-Making***

## ***in the Primary Teacher/Teaching Assistant Relationship***

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***Identifying and understanding the boundaries of decision-making practices; empirical findings from three primary classroom settings using exploratory case study methods***

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## Summary

As a result of the Workforce Reform Agreement (2003)<sup>1</sup> the working practices of teachers have changed greatly over the last eleven years, accompanied by a dramatic enhancement of the role of teaching assistants during the same period. In the course of these changes the area of teacher/teaching assistant decision-making has been left under-researched.

With so many shifting scenarios, sets of activities and coalitions of the teacher and teaching assistant there is no simple, single decision-making process which can be applied across the board. The findings show that fluent and flexible decisions happen because of close working connections experienced by the primary teacher and his/her teaching assistant (increasingly called a 'para-professional'), where professional activities overlap and responsibility for decision making is shared.

Decisions can be considered programmed (teacher-directed), non-programmed (self-initiated) and negotiated<sup>2</sup>. Old models of 'helper' or 'aide'<sup>3</sup> supporting the teacher have gone along with the pre-determined role for the teacher which rested on a recognised strong technical culture, specialised knowledge and high degrees of autonomy<sup>4</sup>. To highlight the use of these forms of decision-making, examples have been given from practising primary teachers, teaching assistants and HLTAs. These stem from three recorded conversations with three pairs of teachers and teaching assistants (in a large three form entry Junior, a large three form entry full Infants and a moderate-sized CE Primary) plus results from a postal survey of selected pairs of linked teachers and their teaching assistants in primary schools within an area of a southern Local Authority.

## The rise and development of teachers and teaching assistants as joint decision-makers

The emergence of teaching assistants in England as a major component of the education workforce has been dynamic, rapid and controversial; made more so as a consequence of a high-profile policy shift (Workforce Reform Agenda 2003). However, little attention has been paid to the ways support works in the classroom and how decisions are made. Whilst there is an opinion<sup>5</sup> that increased numbers of teaching assistants are of benefit to pupils there is little certainty as to how teaching assistants should best engage in decision-making. What decisions should be made and by whom? What are the boundaries of the decisions? What findings there are perhaps suggest that complex inter-personal and professional uncertainties are introduced when ‘other’ people work alongside the class teacher, uncertainties that are also found in situations where teachers themselves work together in the same environment, e.g. in team teaching, shadowing and observing one another. More research needs to be done on changes that occur when others move into the domain of the teacher and engage in decision-making. But the research that does already exist tends to focus on the consequences of teaching assistant employment in relation to pupil progress in general<sup>6</sup>.

### Key findings from interviews and surveys

#### **Programmed Decisions: “We’ve been included in a lot more things”**

The data revealed that teaching assistants were regularly included in the formulation of programmed teaching decisions made by the class teachers especially ones about group work in literacy, phonics and numeracy. Other decisions involving the teaching assistant concerned assessments, contributions to reports and individual educational programmes (IEPs) were also found.

Related agreed decisions were featured where the teaching assistant was involved in helping the teacher deliver curriculum targets. One teacher remarked: *“I am accountable and I have a strong feeling for that because we are responsible for the children’s levels and it really wouldn’t be appropriate for me to put that pressure on my TA so I have to make certain decisions...”*

**Non-programmed decisions “I think she makes a number of decisions on the spur of the moment...”**

The survey and interview also found evidence of non-programmed decision which allowed for a flexible approach to discipline and teaching by the teaching assistant in the classroom. This kind of flexible and supportive involvement of the teaching assistant also involved hearing children read, occasional marking, sorting of equipment & resources and support group work where the teaching assistant was operating using his/her own initiative without frequent recourse to the teacher. One teacher commented “I think she [the TA] makes a number of decisions on the spur of the moment about whether they [the children] have got it and at the end of the lesson comes and tells me ‘they didn’t really get this so we didn’t move on’...”

**The Importance of Negotiation & Flexibility**

Data from the postal survey showed 70% of teachers and 80% of the teaching assistants were in agreement about the importance of negotiation in decision making. The postal survey revealed too that 95% of the teachers and 100% of the teaching assistants felt there was flexibility in decision-making.

The survey showed there was close liaison in the professional practice of teachers and teaching assistants when making decisions about arrangements for testing children, responding to parents, order of work in the classroom and personal decision-making about the pace and amendments to group work that the teaching assistant might need to make whilst the lesson was in progress. A teaching assistant remarked in the recorded interviews: “Yes there would be negotiation within that. If it’s not working according to plan, Susan (CT) doesn’t mind if we fit in what we think is appropriate”. The teacher in the same classroom added: “I decide the curriculum topics we do. I’m more than happy if Margaret (TA) says, “we don’t do this or that or I’ve found this”, and then incorporate that into the lesson to extend the children”. All of this was found to be of benefit to the working relationship of teachers and teaching assistants and importantly the progress of the children.

The postal survey replies and the recorded conversations introduced evidence of other activities where teaching assistants took the lead and displayed independent decision making. Activities included:

- Meeting new parents at the pre-entrance induction day
- Assembling lesson resources
- Helping with displays in the classroom
- Recording children's reading
- Supporting children in the computer suite
- Liaising with other teaching assistants within the same year group

- Supporting with distribution of homework
- Maintaining a close watch on Health & Safety

The level and variety of involvement revealed the degree to which the teaching assistant has become embedded in school life, and what a strong a position he/she is now in to be able to share in decision-making with the class teacher. Teaching assistants have gained knowledge through their familiarity with school routines and practices, and through this enhanced position a platform is thus created for the teaching assistant to engage in decision making both in partnership with the class teacher and autonomously.

The evidence shows that the classroom has witnessed a move from a position where decisions were largely programmed and non-negotiated to a situation where there is a great deal of flexibility, sharing and mutuality, and input from the teaching assistant in the ways decisions are made and carried out. The roles of the two 'actors' have been refined and changed by altered and merged work patterns with the resultant job redistribution of duties affecting decision-making.

#### **Next steps in joint decision-making training**

The research undertaken points to the need for teachers and trainee teachers to explore the management skills needed to work in effective partnership with teaching assistants in order to take more decisions collectively in the primary school settings. The UK QTS requirements state: *"Teachers should deploy support staff effectively"*<sup>7</sup>. More needs to be done to allow the teachers and teaching assistants time to fully assimilate changes in curriculum, assessment and developments, for example child protection legislation; the two linked individuals need support from senior management to be able to manage the work schedule and make effective decisions about it.

#### **Training recommendations and impact on policy and professional practice**

To accommodate to the changing culture of the working relationship and collaboration of the two 'actors' and provide positive support, the project recommends as a starting point, an audit of the professional needs of teachers and teaching assistants. Having obtained a benchmark and guide to their strengths, levels of experience and areas for development:

- **Joint training should be offered geared to need.** From that 'finding out' of their respective level of experience/skill-base/aptitude, etc. it is suggested the inclusion of certain specific skills in the training such as: awareness raising as to the redrawn professional/boundaries, scope of the duties and responsibilities of both the teacher and teaching assistant.

- **Support to be provided for collaborative working and negotiation in decision-making** to facilitate efficient and effective decision-making in relation to curriculum needs and priorities. Building up transactional relationships knowledge, and the skills related to managing the performance of others especially for the teacher would figure in the joint training.
- **Raise the understanding of the influence of background and outlook** of each 'actor' that has a bearing on decision-making.
- **Build coherence in decision-making through senior management teams** better managing and creating systems and approaches to support the changes required.

The relationship between teachers and teaching assistants is changing. Working within a learning environment where health and safety and child protection have high priority alongside academic attainment requires the balance of decision making to shift away from solely being programmed by the class teacher. The evidence suggests that adopting an approach that allows participants to create knowledge through networking and joint-school-based training rather than being presented with static solutions is required to improve decision-making. This enquiry-based, professional training around decision-making would empower teachers and allow them to take ownership of their work and help them to find bespoke answers to challenges which would work in their classrooms.

**Conclusion – “Teaching assistants are putting more of themselves into the teaching”**

During a recorded conversation with a teacher they remarked: *“teaching assistants are putting more of themselves into the teaching”*. Despite this realisation that the role of the teaching assistant had fundamentally changed in the last decade this still needs to be formally recognized in the decision making practices currently employed in schools. The Head of Workforce Reform in the southern LEA remarked: *“There is an overt need for training to develop and change teachers’ perceptions.”* Doubtless there still remains a view that teachers have yet to completely accept that teaching assistants are now very much a fixed addition to the classroom. However the evidence shows that teachers and teaching assistants are now closely engaged in decision making at ground level and that movement from the teacher as solo decision maker to joint decision maker with the ‘para-professional’ is becoming increasingly established on the boundary of joint working in today’s primary schools.

References:

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